

Years 3 & 4 · Free resource

The *ch* spelling: /k/ sound (Greek origin) and /ʃ/ sound (French origin)

Year group: 3/4

Source: DfE, *English Appendix 1: Spelling*, National Curriculum for England (2013) — Years 3–4, Other spellings

Curriculum requirement: Statutory

The rule

The letters *ch* usually make the /tʃ/ sound (*chocolate*, *chair*, *child*). But in words borrowed from Greek and French, *ch* makes a different sound.

From Greek: *ch* makes the /k/ sound

chemist, *chorus*, *character*, *scheme*, *echo*

From French: *ch* makes the /ʃ/ sound ("sh")

chef, *chalet*, *machine*, *brochure*, *champagne*

This is not a rule to memorise word by word — it is a pattern to understand. Once children know *why* these words have an unusual *ch* sound, they remember the spellings far more reliably.

Why etymology makes this make sense

English spelling reflects word history. When a word was borrowed, its spelling came with it.

Greek words entered English through Latin and then through academic, scientific, and religious writing. Greek used the letter *chi* (χ) which was transliterated as *ch* in Latin, even though it made a /k/ sound. So every word of Greek origin with *ch* makes the /k/ sound.

French words entered English after the Norman Conquest (1066). In French, the letters *ch* make the /ʃ/ sound (as in modern French *château*, *chef*). Words that came from French kept their French spelling, including the *ch* = /ʃ/ pattern.

This gives children a powerful memory hook:

Sounds like /k/? Think science, school, ancient knowledge → **Greek**

Sounds like /ʃ/ and feels glamorous or culinary? → **French**

Greek *ch* = /k/ examples

(† = statutory Y3/4 word)

Word	Connection
character †	Greek <i>kharaktēr</i> – a mark or feature
scheme †	Greek <i>skhēma</i> – a plan or shape
echo	Greek <i>ēkhō</i> – a sound bouncing back
chemist / chemistry	Greek <i>khēmeia</i> – the study of matter
chorus	Greek <i>choros</i> – a group of singers
school	Greek <i>skholē</i> – leisure; a place of learning
ache	Old English/Greek <i>akhos</i> – pain
orchestra	Greek <i>orkhēstra</i> – dancing floor
archive	Greek <i>arkheion</i> – public records
monarch	Greek <i>monarkhos</i> – sole ruler
technology	Greek <i>tekhnologia</i> – systematic skill
stomach	Greek <i>stomakhos</i>
anchor	Greek <i>ankura</i>

Pattern note: Many Greek *ch* words relate to science, music, politics, or medicine — the subjects where Greek vocabulary was adopted into English through academic tradition.

French *ch* = /ʃ/ examples

Word	Connection
chef	French – a head cook
chalet	French – a mountain house
machine	French, from Latin <i>machina</i>
brochure	French <i>brochure</i> – a stitched pamphlet
champagne	French – the region and the drink
chauffeur	French – a driver
chandelier	French – a branching candleholder
parachute	French <i>para-</i> (against) + <i>chute</i> (fall)
crochet	French – a type of needlework
cache	French – a hiding place
niche	French – a hollow or specialised position
moustache	French, from Italian

Pattern note: Many French *ch* words relate to food, fashion, luxury goods, or places — reflecting the French-speaking Norman ruling class who brought these concepts into English after 1066.

The three sounds of *ch* – summary table

Sound	Examples	Origin
/tʃ/ (the "normal" ch)	<i>child, church, chin, watch</i>	Old English
/k/	<i>chorus, chemistry, school</i>	Greek
/ʃ/ ("sh")	<i>chef, machine, brochure</i>	French

Common mistakes and why they happen

Wrong	Right	Why
<i>kemist</i>	chemist	<i>ch</i> from Greek makes /k/
<i>karacter</i>	character	<i>ch</i> from Greek makes /k/
<i>shef</i>	chef	<i>ch</i> from French makes /ʃ/
<i>masheen</i>	machine	<i>ch</i> from French makes /ʃ/
<i>skeme</i>	scheme	<i>ch</i> from Greek makes /k/
<i>ecko</i>	echo	<i>ch</i> from Greek makes /k/

Word sort activity

Listen to each word. Sort by the sound the ch makes.

Words: character · chef · chorus · machine · chemist · chalet · echo · scheme · brochure · school · anchor · stomach · champagne · orchestra

<i>ch</i> makes /k/ (Greek)	<i>ch</i> makes /ʃ/ (French)	<i>ch</i> makes /tʃ/ (familiar)

Extension challenge: Look up one word from each column. What was it originally used to mean?

Classroom activity: The Word Detective

Tell children they are detectives investigating the origins of words. Present these three word families and ask:

"All these words have ch. Say them aloud. What do you notice? Can you sort them by sound and then guess which language they came from?"

Set A: chemistry · chorus · character · school

Set B: chef · chauffeur · machine · brochure

Set C: children · church · chicken · cheese

Discuss: what subjects or topics do the Greek words relate to? What about the French words?

Dictation sentences (teacher-ready)

The **character** in the story showed great bravery throughout the **scheme**.

The **chemist** measured each ingredient carefully before the experiment.

The whole **chorus** sang together, their voices creating a perfect **echo**.

The **chef** prepared a meal using a **machine** that no one had seen before.

She picked up the **brochure** and read about the mountain **chalet**.

Classroom questions

Chemistry, *chorus*, and *character* all start with *ch* but sound like /k/. Where did they come from?

Chef and *machine* sound like they start with "sh." What language brought these words into English?

Can you think of a science word that has *ch* making the /k/ sound?

The word *school* comes from the Greek *skholē*, meaning "leisure." Why do you think a place of learning was connected to leisure in ancient Greece?

Stomach and *anchor* also have Greek *ch* making /k/. Can you say them and hear the /k/?

Links to other rules

Y3/4 rule 07: -gue and -que endings — another set of French-borrowed spellings with "silent" letters

General etymology work (Y5/6) — deepen understanding of Latin/Greek/French origins across all spelling patterns

Source: DfE English Appendix 1: Spelling (2013). Etymology references verified against Oxford English Dictionary and standard etymological sources. All statutory word examples verified against the published statutory word lists for Years 3–4.